DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 203 933 JC 810 377

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TITLE Commentary: 'Consumerism' and Its Effect on Higher Education.
PUB DATE 4 Feb 81
NOTE 7p.: Appeared first in the "Sacramento Bee" (February 4, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Role: Community Colleges: *Educational Demand: *Nontraditional Students: *Social Change: Two Year Colleges: Two Year College Students

ABSTRACT

Until 20 years ago, it was commonly assumed that men would spend their time working at a single career, that women would raise families, that senior citizens would retire from work and view at age 65, and that the physically handicapped would be confined to the back rooms of whatever firms offered them employment. Recent socioeconomic changes, however, have released individuals from these stereotypical life patterns and allowed an increasing number of persons to enter the mainstream of society. These individuals have become more demanding users of higher education, and colleges have had to respond with a variety of new programs and instructional delivery systems. Indeed, the community college of today is offering programs to meet the needs of a diverse set of educational consumers, which includes: (1) traditional 18-year-old baccalaureate students: (2) vocational students: (3) area business executives who, through their participation on advisory committees, help shape the curriculum to meet local training and education needs: (4) those who desire or need to prepare for a new career: (5) an increased number of women: and (6) the growing number of senior citizens who are returning to school. In short, colleges have adapted well to a more sophisticated, goal-oriented public and have proven once again to be an accurate barometer of the social climate. (JP)

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COMMENTARY:
'CONSUMERISM' AND ITS EFFECT ON HIGHER EDUCATION

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Special to the Sacramento Bee

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COMMENTARY:

'CONSUMERISM' AND ITS EFFECT ON HIGHER EDUCATION

"Consumerism" has hit higher education. There have been significant changes in who uses higher education -- and how they use it -- as a result of recent economic and social change. This has not happened all at once, but gradually, and with increasing emphasis during the past five years. The result is a public which has grown more demanding and persistent as a user of higher education.

As our socio-economic environment changes, so does our attitude toward our Education. The fifties were a decade of acceptance, the sixties a decade of rejection of many common values and traditional institutions. Whether campuses are a hotbed or merely a reflection of the nation's social direction, they have proven to be an accurate point at which to take the nation's pulse.

What is the pulse of today, begun in the last decade and continuing into the eighties? We don't need the college campuses to tell us that the theme today is all business: we are more goal-oriented, battling inflation and growing personally inflation and growing personnaly. To accomplish this, Americans have become better users of education.

Until twenty years ago, a common assumption was that adults (predominantly men) should expect to spend their work-lives at a single career, that women should raise families, that senior citizens should retire from work and view at age 65, and that physically handicapped people should be confined to the back rooms of whatever firms would offer employment. These assumptions are no longer valid. On a stage set by legislation, economic change, improved medical care and, in the case of women, a century of struggle, all these groups have become better users of education, and consequently, more active and productive members of society. Our nation's higher education has had to change -- and in many cases improve -- its programs and methods of delivery in order to serve these divergent groups. The community colleges, by virtue of their organization best able to respond quickly, have served as threshold of life change for millions of adults during the past decade.

Who uses higher education in 1980? The traditional, baccalaureate-bound 18-year-old is still with us. Though in decreasing numbers, these people still account for half the nation's community college enrollments. Many other classroom seats are filled by those aiming for jobs in the technical fields, a trend which some futurists predict will broaden soon with the addition of a growing human services industry.

The employing sector is a user of education, and perhaps one of the most demanding. Advisory committees comprised of people in business, industry and the professions are a key element in keeping both academic and technical training programs relevant and in balance. For example, while recent emphasis in the job market has been on technical ability, our area's employers have reminded us that they want to hire graduates who have good communication and leadership skills -- assets that are gained from the liberal arts side of the campus.

The average American adult will have five careers in his or her lifetime. This is due partly to changing emphases in business, industry and the professions, and in part to the fact that people are tending to use the available forms of education to their advantage. The mid-life career change is particularly significant in Sacramento, where dozens of State and Federal employers -- including three major military bases -- produce thousands of retirees, many of whom are in their forties and fifties. Events of the past, such as the layoffs at Aerojet, remind us that a mid-life career change is not only possible, but sometimes manditory. These kinds of events force people to become efficient users of education to prepare for new forms of livelihood.

A high school diploma was once the ticket to job entry level. Then the bachelor's degree became the route to financial success and security, and shortly afterwards the master's degree. While an educational pedigree still carries clout, what people have found gets them results is what they know and what they can do. Our schools and colleges have received some criticism -- some of it justly -- for not responding quickly enough to meet these challenges. Generally, though, the colleges and universities have adapted well to a more sophisticated, goal-oriented public.

Women as a group have become better users of education. A preponderance of smaller families, growing numbers of single-parent families and the need for two incomes in many families have contributed to growth of the number of women in the work force. Women have also been aggressive in broadening their professional and technical career opportunities. Thousands of women have shifted their educational focus from macrame to management, with a resultant need for change in what we teach at our schools, colleges and universities.

Our senior citizens still statistically have productive years ahead, despite the recently extended retirement age. The seniors who make their years productive include those who are returning -- at age seventy plus -- to the

college campus. Our society's attitudes toward these citizens will need to change further, perhaps their knowledge and capabilities can be tapped in some as-yet-undiscovered ways. Our challenge as educators is to recognize that learning is a life-long process, and that senior citizens, as well as other groups in our population, are becoming better users of education.

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AUG 21 1981